

## “And Be Thankful”

Colossians 3:12-17

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I am always glad when wedding and civil union couples select Colossians 3 as a text for their sacred ceremony. This passage is laced with wise counsel for faithful living. Though it certainly applies to couples anticipating a life together, it is also relevant for the whole church family. The author of this letter, the Apostle Paul, had a passion for church people living faithfully, living as if they could be a light in their communities, living as if it were the living that mattered. Thus he encourages church people: bear with one another; forgive each other; let peace dwell in your hearts.

The one admonition in the text that keeps grabbing my attention is the three word sentence; “And be thankful.” When I arrived in Lancaster, Wisconsin to be the minister of the Congregational Church there, I ran into the Reverend Francis Kranz who had just retired from that pulpit after a 31 year pastorate, and who had some advice for me. He told me that no one really cared about my opinions, but that it was my convictions they’d want to hear about. When I read this passage from Colossians, it feels like Paul’s convictions we are hearing. And when I hear him say, “Be thankful,” I am convicted; that is, I am persuaded to let gratitude be a hallmark of my identity. It is not my opinion but my conviction that we are to live each day as if it were a thanksgiving day. When I die, I hope somebody will feel compelled to write on my stone, ‘He was a grateful human being.’

It seems to me there are days when it is easy to be thankful, zippity doo dah days, when the sun is shining and everything is going my way.

On those days, we start listing what we're thankful for and the list is endless. But there are those other days, days when everybody gets out of bed on the wrong side, days when the only news is bad news, days when it's hard to see a reason for continuing the journey. On those days, there is no energy for even imagining a list of gratitude.

Yet, Paul says, "Be thankful." The implication is that we be in touch with those deep currents of gratitude, the bedrock gratitude that sustains us over the long haul, gratitude that is not subject to the daily weather forecast or the quarterly school report card or the six month dental check-up.

Paul's own life was a roller coaster ride. He had some kind of a permanent ailment which he describes only as a thorn in his side. Some days I wonder if it was carpal tunnel syndrome or neuropathy or Crone's Disease or Rheumatoid Arthritis. He doesn't go into detail about it, just admits to having a thorn in his side. His life was a roller coaster ride. In some towns where he preached, he was welcomed with a red carpet and cake with chocolate icing and sweetened iced tea. In other towns where he offered the Gospel message, he was threatened and roughed up and run out of the county. His gratitude was not based in the day to day vicissitudes of life, but in the deep knowing that whether he lived or died his life belonged to a redeeming, loving, reconciling God.

So, when I think about being thankful, I try to get in touch with those deeper currents of truth that sustain me...no matter what happens day to day.

One of these deeper currents is the certainty that no matter what happens, no matter how desperate our lives become, **there is nothing that is able to separate us from the love of Christ**; not unemployment, not retirement, not imprisonment, not divorce, not mental illness, not intoxication, not felonious behavior, not drug-addiction, not a world-wide recession, not double-digit inflation, not one of those rejecting Dear John letters, not even death has enough clout to separate us from the love of the One who came into the world to be a Light, to adopt us into God's own family. I am grateful for this truth everyday. That's a conviction, not an opinion.

And I try, as hard as I can, to express that gratitude by reaching out to individuals and families who ARE feeling separated, separated from their church, from their God, from themselves, from that which gives meaning to our existence. Sometimes I fail, but I try as hard as I can. If God is unwilling to set me adrift, then I am unwilling to ignore anyone who is in that place of being adrift, cutoff from that which is life-giving. It is not enough for me to FEEL thankful; I have a passion for taking the next step, for BEING thankful; that is, for LIVING thankfully.

And this becomes a way for a local church to understand its mission. Each congregation is to discern where the separation persists and then to go and build a bridge. Thirty years ago, families in the community were feeling separated from basic support by mental illness, so the church built a bridge, now known as Inter-Community Mental Health. Twenty five years ago, families in our suburban community were feeling separated from life in the inner city, so the church build a bridge with the Horace Bushnell Congregational Church on Albany Avenue in Hartford's north end.

Twenty years ago, families in the community were feeling estranged by the oppression of homophobia, so the church built a bridge by declaring itself Open and Affirming.

Fifteen years ago, families in the community were struggling with sons and daughters who could not find a reliable moral compass, so the church built a bridge, opening its mission trips and its Wednesday School and its Confirmation program to any teenager who is looking for a more excellent way. Ten years ago, families in the community weren't finding a faith-based nursery school for their three and four year olds, so the church built a bridge, doubling the staff and doubling the enrollment in the High Street Nursery School.

Building bridges to transcend separations is no superficial opinion; it is a conviction. It is a conviction shared widely in this church. In a way, it's what keeps me going. It's what energizes all of us. It begins with Paul's admonition to Be Thankful. If I were to offer a homework assignment, it would be to invite you to reflect on those deeper currents of truth that sustain you in the day of trouble, and then, having named them, to be persistent in BEING thankful; that is, in LIVING your thanksgiving. In the greatest of hope, Amen!